

# *Moll Flanders* (1722)

# Defoe's Prose

- The simple and positive quality of Defoe's prose embodies **the new values of the scientific and rational outlook** of the late 17th century.
- This was the tendency of new styles of preaching (Defoe had read the books of Reverend Richard Baxter, for example).
- **Plainness** = supreme aim, although the most educated of his readers could consider him clumsy and repetitive. **Repetition** the simplest of rhetorical devices.
- Defoe said: Preaching sermons is speaking to a few of mankind, printing books is talking to the whole world.

# Journalism

- Defoe's training was in the hard school of journalism. From 1704 to 1713, for 9 years, he edited the thrice-weekly newspaper *The Review*.
- The **gift of readability** comes from this practice.
- Direct connection between his career as a journalist and pamphleteer and the **search of verisimilitude**. Defoe explains, argues, looks for evidence about his arguments.
- Moll's **moralizing attitude** comes from the sermons.

# Allusive Name: a Deliberate Choice

- Name Moll Flanders = a **nickname**. Nicknames are indicative/suggestive of characteristics, qualities or defects. Defoe lets us know what a sort of woman she is.
- Moll = in the slang of the time means a **woman of low repute**, often the girlfriend of a criminal.
- **Moll Cut-Purse** is also the name of a notorious female thief, immortalised in 2 plays of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.
- Moll does not know how she came to be called by such a name, but assumes it when she takes shelter in the Mint /mint/ (a sanctuary for debtors) after the bankruptcy of her 2<sup>nd</sup> husband, the draper.

# The Flanders

- Flanders: Fiandre (region in Belgium, next to Holland)
- Flemish women were renowned for cloth-making abilities, weaving fine Flanders linen. Moll's association with lace, needlework and mending begins in her infancy. For her, working with the needle equates with being a gentlewoman but she naively (and ironically) admires a "Madam" (the town whore).
- Flanders = Holland. Flemish, Dutch women had a reputation as prostitutes in England. Famous brothel in London known as Holland's Leaguer.
- Allusion in Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath*.

# Recapitulation: First Part

- The story falls into **2 main parts**: the first and longer one is devoted to her career as a wife, the second to her criminal activities and their consequences.
- The **first part** is made of 5 episodes. Each of them ends with the death or departure of a husband. 2 main sub-episodes: the abortive affair with a married man at Bath and the stratagems by which her friend the Redriff widow (116) secures herself a mate (113-120).

# Recapitulation: Second part

- Moll turns thief when she can no longer be expected to be courted for a mistress or a wife.
- Considered the most interesting.
- Its connection with the rest of the plot is that it finally leads to her arrest and the reunion with James in prison, to her later transportation (with James, too) and eventually to her return to Virginia and her family there.

# Five Husbands (I)

- **First marriage.** With the younger brother, as a consequence of her seduction by the Elder brother. A symbolic prelude to the novel as a whole. Example of social climbing, but she is less “virtuous” than Pamela. **2 children**
- **Second marriage** with the draper who goes bankrupt and has to run away to avoid debtors’ prison. **One dead son.**
- **Third marriage** leads to Virginia, the discovery of her mother and the secret of her birth (her husband turns out to be her half-brother). **3 children but one dies.** But at the end of the book we learn about only one son. Incongruity.



# Five Husbands (II)

- **The Bath lover:** 3 children only one survives.
- **Fourth marriage.** This husband is called in many ways: James, Jemy (211), the Irish or Lancashire husband, the highwayman . He's connected with the later part of the book from Moll's trial at the Old Bailey onwards. 1 son who is given away for adoption.
- **Fifth marriage** with the clerk when he has divorced (242). He dies of a blow for having lost his money giving a loan to a friend. 2 children. Moll is 48.

# Five Marriages

- **First two marriages**, contracted out of expediency (so, immoral for Defoe), **are at least legal**. **The other three are not**. They begin soon after her first assumption of the surname **Flanders** (at the Mint) → **Moral decline**. Moll is becoming the sort of woman her name suggests.
- Incestuous marriage (she discovers it later) then, after the break up, the affair with the married man she meets at Bath. When she gets pregnant she is assisted “by three or four of the best Citizens”.

# Surviving Children

- **Two children** from the first marriage stay with his husband's family.
- **One (or two?)** son(s) from the third husband stay/s in Virginia with Moll's half-brother and mother. This is the only son Moll recognises as such and towards whom she has a motherly behaviour.
- **One son** from the rich Bath lover, who provides for the child's maintenance out of sense of guilt.
- **One son** from Lancashire husband is given away for adoption.
- **Two children** from the fifth husband. What happened to them?

# Relationships with her children

- **Callous** (spietata) in her treatment of most of her children apart from Humphrey, the one in Virginia (who guarantees her inheritance and the plantations). The majority are just mentioned, only to be forgotten, and left in the care of relatives or foster-mothers, neither redeemed subsequently nor inquired after, when occasion permits. **Heartless mother**.
- **Personal relationships** in general are not important if not as **partnerships**.

# Psychology

- Leslie Stephen has reproached Defoe with a **lack of psychological analysis**. All of Moll's reactions to events are prompted by **profit** or **danger**. Psychological details would be superfluous.
- We are told very little of Moll's personality.
- Particular deficiency in dealing with personal relationships. **Very little is said about the quality** of Moll's loves. She confesses of "having lain with 13 men" (quantity). Incongruity: we only know of six of them and we cannot be sure which of them she preferred.

# Moll a proto-Feminist?

- For Moll being a **gentlewoman** means not going to service (servants and waitresses joined a wealthy family having all duties and no rights), but having an **autonomous job**, “to work for myself”, (p. 50), being economically independent (first having a regular job and then an illicit, criminal activity).
- But in the upper classes this was not possible: a regular job for a woman and the status of gentlewoman were not compatible → **marriage** is the only possible job (J. **Austen** deals with this issue, too, a century later)

# Importance of Education

- Moll can make her capital **profit** because of her enterprising spirit and intelligence but also for the **education** she has received (indirectly) in the host family where she lived when she was 17-18 years old (p. 55-6). She is called “Betty”, the generic name for a **chambermaid** (see also Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock*).

# Marriage Market

- Women were in an uncompetitive position in the marriage market: this is a point frequently made by Defoe. See what the sister (in the family where Moll lives at the beginning ) says about men: they marry rich women and make love to beautiful ones as lovers, mistresses (58).
- Women are “**bought**” through their dowries. Commercial terms are often applied to marriage (p. 104: sold)
- After 5 years, her first husband dies and she is a rich widow. Consideration about love and marriage (103 and 112).



# Husband Hunting

- She tries to run the marriage “game” herself (pp. 103-104). Second husband the Draper. **She has the money** and wants **the status of** married woman. Wrong investment. Her husband wastes all her capital and goes bankrupt.
- The draper must run away for legal problems. She “has a husband and no husband” = legally married but deserted by her husband. (108)

# Prudential Marriages

- She is in the market for a 3rd husband. Defoe's **criticism of prudential matches** → his essay: *Conjugal Lewdness: or Matrimonial Whoredom* (1727), later renamed *A Treatise Concerning the Use and Abuse of the Marriage Bed* .
- Women who consent to such alliances are “little more than legal prostitutes”. This is what she is actually looking for → (compare with J. Austen on marriage)

# Female Comradeship

- Men have the upper hand in marriage questions. Episode of the woman neighbour : she enquires about him, he is resented by this and leaves her (112). Men want to rule the game without being controlled or judged . Women must be careful about fortune hunters (112). When women ally and form a coalition they win.
- Another example of female comradeship: with her governess.
- Moll will then learn the rules for catching a husband. Strategic behaviour, a job.

# Moral Comment

- Groups of “Key scenes” or fully realised scenes (often including dialogue) alternate with passages of summary + moralising/didactic reflections/comment.
- Examples: pp. 59-61. Vanity and Pride obfuscate her judgement.
- Repentance pp. 364-5
- Beginning of her career as a thief p.254. Moralising p. 256.